Intertextuality in Advertising

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Abstract

The visual culture has radically changed our conception of the world and has widened the space for creativity. Media text like advertising has contributed a lot to the refraction, legitimisation and transformation of social practices. In such process it has become intertextual to varied texts drawn from different fields. The use of intertextuality in advertising is a conscious strategy that keeps viewers busy in the interpretive activity and thus makes ad texts attractive and memorable. In an advertising text intertextuality has numerous possibilities for existence and complicating the textual fabric. The digital technique further complicates the matter when it confuses the understanding of indexical and iconic signs. This present article explores the concept of intertextuality, its varieties and its strategic use in multimodal texts of advertising. It also assesses how the semiotic background of a text is modified to serve the purpose of a new context.

What is Intertextuality

Intertextuality has been a prominent issue in the critical analysis of texts. But its various interpretations have made it a complex term. Etymologically the word intertextuality means a text among texts. For structuralists a text has always been considered a closed structure, a compact whole, enjoying sovereignty having distinct boundaries. Interpretation for such a structure is stable and considered to be author-centred. The question that arises in such a context is if creation of the structure is not original on the part of the author and interpretive activity lies in the reader how can the text be a closed structure and self-contained. Roland Barthes has already proclaimed this when he spoke out thus:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author- God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. ... the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them. Did he wish to *express himself*, he ought at least to know that the inner 'thing' he thinks to 'translate' is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely; ... (1977:146)

The system one utilises to express himself is inherited and with it is inherited its semiotic background. Apart from that every discourse is a continuation of its former and so dependent on it. When the same discourse flows through various texts, involuntarily it will make all the texts dependent on each other and so intertexts. Michel Foucault also states that:

The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network... The book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hands... Its unity is variable and relative. (1974:23)

Therefore, whether structurally or in content, every text is dependent on other texts. The coining of the word 'Intertextuality' by Julia Kristeva in 1960s is just a concrete expression of this idea which gives a different dimension to the understanding of text. Going away from the structuralist notion of stable signification of a text she proclaims thus:

Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*. (1986:37)

Kristeva argued against the scientific analysis of a text that structuralists propounded, since interpretation of a text is a human phenomenon and affiliated to social, cultural and historical contexts. Thus intertextuality is a post-structural phenomenon that opposes the very concept that a text exists in its sovereign state, since it is a constituent of one or several texts. As Graham Allen puts it nicely:

> If structuralist literary critics believe that Saussurean linguistics can help criticism become objective, even scientific in nature, then poststructuralist critics of the 1960s and beyond have argued that criticism, like literature itself, is inherently unstable, the product of subjective desires and drives. The term intertextuality was initially employed by poststructuralist theorists and critics in their attempt to disrupt notions of stable meaning and objective interpretation. (2000:3)

Where Kristeva liberates the text and places it in the vast semiosphere among the ocean of texts, Barthes, on the other hand, destabilises the texts for their inter-dependence. He also feels intertextuality is not only a field of influence but advancement of discourse and it cannot be considered as a voyage to the origin of the text as he proclaims thus:

> The intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text, is not to be confused with some origin of the text: to try to find the 'sources', the 'influences' of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*: they are quotations without inverted commas. (1977:160)

In that sense no text is original and yet paradoxically loses its source as every assumed source is in fact an intertext to another source. Though this dimension in textual analysis has been considered recently yet the new terminology has age-old application. It was not that intertextuality never existed before the coining of the word but it was never dealt with seriously. A history of intertextuality has never been written. Instances of intertextuality are widely found in the works of Virgil, Ovid and Dante as a relation to other texts and social contexts. Such concept is discussed in the writings of Plato and Aristotle when they explicitly discuss theories

of imitation. The concept of intertextuality is discussed intensively in the works of Barthes, Bakhtin, Volosinov, Riffaterre and Kristeva whereas all of them discussed intertextuality as a relation existing among texts but they never discussed the nature of intertextuality in specific terms. Gerard Genette for the first time attempts a concrete analysis of intertextuality in specific texts in his triad: *The Architext, Palimpsests* and *Paratext*. Unlike others he coins a more inclusive term 'Transtextuality' to define the relation of a text to other texts. He has listed its five sub types as intertextuality, paratextuality, architextuality, metatextuality and hypotextuality. He defines intertextuality as quotation, plagiarism and allusions that occur inside a text. While trying to judge the degree of intertextuality he even defines some of the possible features of intertextuality such as reflexivity, alteration, explicitness, criticality to comprehension, scale of adoption and structure of unboundedness.

Intertextuality and Interpretation

Intertextuality not only brings the semantic component of the text but also the semiotic background of it. The primary intention of every borrowed text is modified and restructured when it is inserted within a new context. Thus intertextuality creates a tension between the primary and secondary intentions and affects hermeneutics. Graham Allen puts it nicely:

> The literary text is no longer viewed as a unique and autonomous entity but as the product of a host of pre-existent codes, discourses and previous texts. Every word in a text in this sense is intertextual and so must be read not only in terms of a meaning presumed to exist within the text itself, but also in terms of meaningful relations stretching far outside the text into a host of cultural discourses. Intertextuality, in this sense, questions our apparently commonsensical notions of what is *inside* and what *outside* the text, viewing meaning as something that can never be contained and constrained within the text itself. There is a mistaken tendency in readers of Kristeva to confuse intertextuality with more traditional, author-based concepts, particularly the concept of *influence*. Intertextuality is not, however, an intended reference by an author to another text: intertextuality is the very condition of signification, of meaning, in literary and indeed all language. (2003:82)

Thus intertextuality prevails in a text from its genesis to interpretive activity. Intertextuality is a force that not only binds the texts but also affects their interpretation. Interpretation in such an incidence is the outcome of both intratextuality and intertextuality. Intratextuality keeps the textual elements coherent enough to bring out a meaning. The same textual elements being intertextual to other texts and discourses also influence the final interpretation. The spirit of intertextuality imbalances the fabric of expression and writer's intention when it comes in hands of the reader. The writer who creates the text from a semiotic point of view is already using a system and a discourse inherited. In the interpretive activity the reader decodes the text with the system and experiences he has inherited earlier. Thus a specific encoding may produce several decodings depending on the readers' background. Intertextuality presumes that a text is an allusion to other texts and the reader decodes the text from the pre-textual knowledge derived from other texts. So interpretive activity is never an individual act but influenced by the reader's background and the affordances available to him basing on that background. By bringing commonality among different texts, intertextuality in fact enhances the text's literariness. However, it is a different issue that intertextuality may be the outcome of conscious or unconscious strategy.

Intertextuality in Multimedia Texts

Though text was always considered as linguistic phenomenon and accordingly had been discussed yet formation of multimodal texts has changed the concept of texts and its structural base. From a semiotic point of view a text can be a composition of different codes each having its own signs and creating separate information structures which are syntagmatically related and bound for final interpretation. Multimodal text becomes a complex phenomenon in hermeneutics as they establish a real life scenario where inter-code cohesion is possible both spatially and temporally. Especially advertising in its long journey has evolved as complex genre and the modern form is not so simple like its precursors. The modern advertisements are so complex that one needs to be ad-educated to comprehend the text fully. Advertisers are always in need of adding varieties to the commodity sign to attract the passive consumer. This, in turn brings varieties in advertising discourse. It no more overtly tells the viewer to buy things. It plays variety of roles instead – it amuses the viewer with its humour, it makes itself a kind of puzzle to

be solved and it acts like a serious and sophisticated art. This self-reflexive nature of ads has given space to wide use of intertextuality at the conscious level. They not only make the ads distinctive and attractive but also assess the viewers' intelligence and knowledge. All the while the viewer finds himself engaged in a decoding activity, being no more repelled by the act of consumerism.

In all multimodal texts as in advertising all the specific modes like linguistic, visual and aural can have their respective intertextualities but since they co-exist together there is always a chance of intertextualities between two different modes. An allusion and even a translation between two different modes is always possible. Advertising is no exception where different modes are found intertextual to some other modes in other texts. It is interesting to find a picture mode being intertextual to a narrative or a scientific discourse being modified to a narrative. So intertextuality just does not happen at the level of code, but also happens at the thematic level. Intertextuality is an integral part in the advertising texts where two or more of the linguistic, visual and aural texts complement each other for a better understanding of the message by the reader but at the same time there is a probability that intertextuality in one mode may bring out a wrong message for the reader or may go unnoticed by the reader.

Advertisements can be considered as intertexts as every advertisement carries some similar features of the advertising texts that existed earlier. Even the advertising texts portraying the same type of products share similar features in construction. Moreover, as advertisements draw their reality from the world, they establish an intertextual relation with the discourses in existence. According to semioticians they all share the same theory of constructing the world. Chandler speaks thus:

> In order to make sense of many contemporary advertisements (notably cigarette
> ads such as for Silk Cut) one needs to be familiar with others in the same series.
> Expectations are established by reference to one's previous experience in looking
> at related advertisements. Modern visual advertisements make extensive use of
> intertextuality in this way. Sometimes there is no direct reference to the product at
> all. Instant identification of the appropriate interpretative code serves to identify

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the interpreter of the advertisement as a member of an exclusive club, with each

act of interpretation serving to renew one's membership. (2002:200)

Intertextuality at the level of genre makes viewer ad-educated. With each act of interpretation the viewer learns something more about the genre. Another dimension of this genre that needs exploration is the way the intertextualities are deliberately constructed in ad text. The advertiser keeping the character and background of the reader, the sign value of the commodity in mind selects the texts and discourses that will suitably fit into the context. In Indian scenario advertising texts are found intertextual to socio-cultural contexts, myths, folk songs and tales, movies, popular songs, scientific discourse and so on.

Types of Intertextuality

Intertextuality gets realised in a text in a complicated manner and it is difficult to explore the structures of intertextuality. John Fiske explores the intertextual relations and proclaims thus:

We can envisage these intertextual relations on two dimensions, the horizontal and the vertical. Horizontal relations are those between primary texts that are more or less explicitly linked, usually along the axes of genre, character, or content. Vertical intertextuality is that between a primary text, such as a television program or series, and other texts of a different type that refer explicitly to it. These may be secondary texts such as studio publicity, journalistic features, or criticism, or tertiary texts produced by the viewers themselves in the form of letters to the press or, more importantly, of gossip and conversation. (2001:108)

Though intertextual relation can be horizontal and vertical like the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations in a text yet specific representation of intertextuality can be both explicit and implicit. The mere reproduction of texts inside other texts like quotations and allusions may be considered as explicit intertextuality. On the other hand, a mere reproduction of a theme may be considered as implicit intertextuality Even following the genre of a text like parody, travesty and collage can be considered as intertextuality.

Guy de Cook (2006:193-194) has divided the intertextualities in advertising into two categories as intra-generic and inter-generic. Such type of division is made at the level of genre.

An ad can be intertextual to other ads and can also be intertextual to other genre like film or story. But analysing the intertextuality of ad texts involves complications as they are affluent with diverse intertextualities in terms of modes, texts, discourses and cultures. Since in a multimodal text, mode is the essential unit of expression it is easier to divide the types of intertextuality available in advertising into intra-modal and inter-modal. The intra-modal intertextualities can again be divided into visual, aural and linguistic in accordance to the elements available in an ad text. On the other hand, inter-modal intertextuality may be considered as structural occurrences which in fact are inter-modal translation or allusion to a different mode. In such sense inter-modal intertextuality gets realised only at the semantic level.

Intra-modal Intertextuality

Visual Intertextuality

Visual images for their iconic nature attract greater attention. Advertising texts which need attention from the consumers make use of visual images more and in this digital age they come with all attractive features to lure the consumers. Sut Jhally in *ImageBased Culture: Advertising and Popular Culture* (units.muohio.edu) also notes down that the grammar of visual images is different from the grammar of verbal and written language since visual images are strong manipulator of human mind. Even an illiterate person is visually literate enough to decode meaning of a visual text. It is different question whether he is able to decode the intended meaning. Apart from that visual intertextualities which enhance aesthetics of an advertising text in fact makes it a complex structure to decode. Parody is one of the common strategies found in Indian advertising. The reel life characters often appear and re-exhibit the scenes of the soap operas or movies where they promote the products. It is different from the covert advertising as often found in James Bond movies. Even at times parody is practised on the real life happenings and cultural activities. Parody not only brings familiarity to the advertising but also makes them humorous. A very recent example is that of *Lux Onn Innerwear* which parodies the scenes from the movie *Don* with appearance of Shahrukh Khan or Colgate advertisement, which parodies the scenes from the movie *Dabang* with the appearance of the heroine Sonakshi Sinha. Even in *Tata Tea* advertisement the real life office scene is parodied when the applicant offers Tata brand tea as a bribe to the concerned officer. Another type of advertising which is practised these days is

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the episodic ones. The ad texts often come with a conclusion like to be continued and a second sequel comes later on. In these episodic advertising, the texts in fact offer a narrative, become intertextual and promote the product. Such intertextualities keep the consumers in suspense and retain the aesthetic quality of the text. These days, advertisements are also found reflecting information structures which are far away from the reality of the commodity. They become very complex to reflect what the advertisement is about. In such instances pictorial intertextuality, which lies in the logo of the brand, helps consumer to recognise the commodity advertisied. Here the logo creates the visual intertextuality between the two texts.

Aural Intertextuality

Intertextuality in advertisements just not happens in the codes of linguistic and visual signs but also in the aural signs. Certain types of music which occur again and again in different advertising texts, film texts or other audio-visual texts in course of time by themselves create a code. Consequently, human mind differentiates among different types of music which evoke sorrow, happiness, love, romance, fear and so on. But what is significant and worth noticing is plagiarism that occurs with the introduction of songs in advertising texts. Many advertising texts use the popular songs from movies to create the context. The popular song being associated with a different visual text creates impact on the viewer's mind and makes the advertisement memorable. For example, the recent *Kit Kat* ad (youtube.com) uses the popular song '*Kante nahi …*' from the movie *Mr. India* to reflect a romantic relationship between two squirrels. Even at times it is found that the advertiser alters the lyrics of the popular song to serve his purpose. Some advertisers create theme song or music and employ it in every ad of the product though the visual text becomes different. For example, the theme music in every ad of *Titan* watch (youtube.com) is repeated for a long-term effect. The aural intertextuality is significant in ad as it enhances the memorability of the text and heightens its aesthetic value. Apart from the song or music intertextuality, even voice intertextuality also occurs in advertising. The voice of the celebrities, who have earned acclaim for their voice quality, is often used as voice-over in the ad texts which reminds viewers of the real celebrity. In Indian advertising use of the voices of the Bollywood stars like Raj Kumar, Shatrughan Sinha, Amitabh Bachchan is very common.

Linguistic Intertextuality

Since linguistic signs have two modes of expression as visual and aural, linguistic intertextuality in advertising may be considered as visual or aural representation of words, dialogues or quotations from other texts. As such, ad slogan for a particular product is repeated in every ad of the product that reminds the viewer about what the product is about. As for example, a slogan like "Connecting People" in each Nokia advertisement connects all the Nokia ads and makes them intertextual. In constructing a real life scenario the dialogues and registers are borrowed from such contexts and make the texts intertextual to socio-cultural contexts. The re-occurence of popular dialogues from movies is also frequently found in Indian advertising.

Inter-modal Intertextuality

A text can allude to another text in a mode different from its parental mode and modified therein. In multimodal texts as intertextuality binds texts from different modes some have tried to substitute intertextuality with intersemioticity. However, the word intertextuality won't create confusion if one liberates himself from the narrow understanding of text as a linguistic phenomenon and considers it with all possibilities. Inter-modal intertextuality is frequently found in advertising texts as an attention-seeking device. The following advertisement best illustrates this fact:

(Union Bank, adsoftheworld.com.)

The above ad tells about the plans which sometimes do not work. The picture is presented as an elaboration of the linguistic syntagm. *All plans do not fit to your need* and reflects a failed plan. The visual text contains the crow throwing pebbles in to the glass. This representation refers to the fable of thirsty crow, who throws pebbles in to the water pot so that the water level will rise and it can drink the water. But here the advertiser has made certain alteration to the original story

by placing money in the glass instead of water. So the same plan will not be useful because pebbles cannot lift money. The advertiser wants to emphasise that money cannot be accumulated always by the consumers' own plans and experiences. Consumers may need the advice of other experts and in this case the expert is the advertiser *Union Bank*. It's only to establish the fact that a specific good plan does not always work in all contexts, the advertiser has used intertextuality to a fable. The following clips from a TV commercial further substantiate the enormity of intertextuality in advertising:

Mentos, youtube.com.
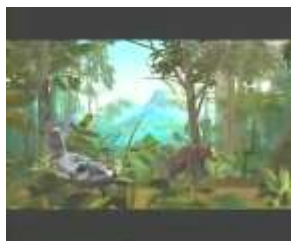
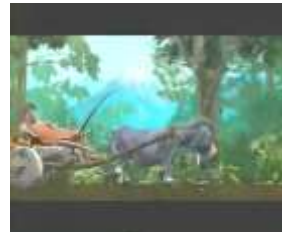|			
(Clip i)	(Clip ii)	(Clip iii)	(Clip iv)
(Clip v)	(Clip vi)	(Clip vii)	(Clip viii)

The above frames have an intertextual relation to Darwin's theory of evolution. Human beings not only have evolved from their predecessors, the monkeys but also in this course have attained knowledge to control the world. The advertiser's strategy is to establish the fact that consumption of *Mentos* starts the evolution process, and even the tagline *Dimag ki Batti Jala De* enunciates that it makes one intelligent. To prove this fact the advertiser constructs a narrative in the light of evolution theory. The first frame shows that back in time, the donkey being the master was carried by the monkey in a cart without wheels. They happened to get *Mentos* and since the donkey refused to eat, it was consumed by the monkey as is reflected in the second frame. After the consumption of Mentos the process of evolution started in the monkey and after

passing the Stone Age (Clip iii); gaining the knowledge of clothing (Clip iv), fire (Clip v) and the use of wheel (Clip vi) and so on; at last he reached the form of human being. He met the donkey in whom no evolution had taken place in all these years. With the enhanced knowledge he compelled the donkey to carry him in a cart having wheels (Clip vii). This physical and mental evolution happened because of the consumption of *Mentos*. An intertextual relation to a scientific discourse not only makes it enjoyable but also memorable.

Every text has some reference to other texts and so is an intertext. The obvious question will be can there be a text which is self-sufficient and self-contained. Theoretically a text can exist but, since the interpretation of a text always depends on the knowledge derived from other texts, will it be communicable? Moreover, though intertexutality makes a text comprehensible yet an extreme case of intertextuality may make a text incomprehensible, just as, when the intratextuality is completely superseded by its intertextuality or when interpretive activity of every textual elements depends completely on a different text. A text can be incomprehensible too when reader is unaware of the texts it is intertextual to.

Intertextuality is not limited only to texts of single semiosphere, rather it synthesises different semiospheres lying beyond time and place. In media texts, intertextuality makes it a hybrid field of enquiry and brings diverse discourses for consideration, analysis and final interpretation. The concept of intertextuality in any media text is an important tool that not only helps hermeneutics but also speaks a lot about the perceptions of the society and how the perceptions get refracted in the texts. Such intertextualities not only legitimize the social practices but also shape new ones. In this post-modern society where visual culture has earned prominence intertextuality is at the core of textual experience.

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